

VERMONT FOOD SYSTEM PLAN PRODUCT BRIEF



PRODUCT: Swine

What's At Stake?

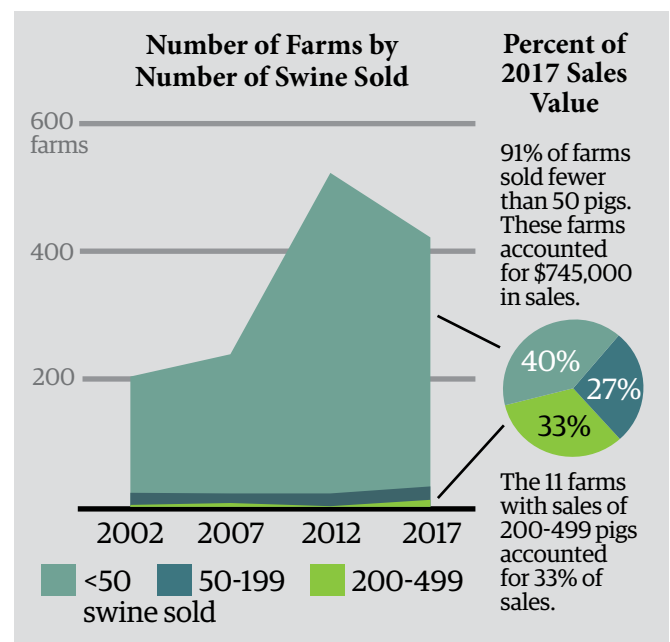
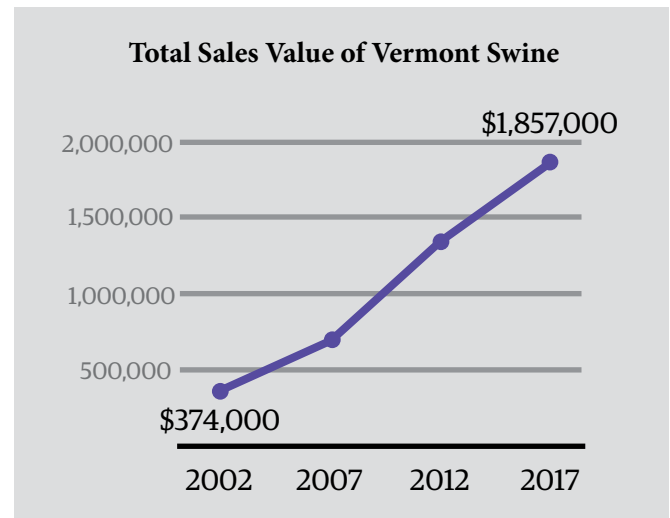
Sales of heritage, local, pastured, organic, and/or managed outdoor pork in Vermont grew 396% between 2002 and 2017 to \$1.86 million annually.¹ Despite this growth and interest in Vermont-grown pork, Vermont swine producers are challenged by high grain prices, little existing swine infrastructure, and the need to access swine genetics that provide efficient growth rates while meeting consumer expectations for consistent quality and flavor. Adding market value to Vermont pork through production practices or end-product attributes represents an opportunity for swine farmers of different scales and situations, whether direct marketing to households or institutions in Vermont, or selling live animals into larger regional outlets, but will require focused coordination to grow smoothly and consistently.

Current Conditions

Vermont pork is experiencing rising demand from consumers regionally and nationally. Larger Vermont swine producers with more built infrastructure are serving market demand in northeastern metropolitan regions (see *Major Metropolitan Markets* brief). High grain prices, small-scale operations, and common use of slower-growing, heritage-breed animals reduce Vermont's competitiveness in commodity and export markets. Typically, small-scale producers prefer heritage or less-commercial swine breeds, either for outdoor hardiness, ease of management in a low-intensity system, or particular meat quality attributes. Profitability is highly dependent upon the price and availability of feed, and maintaining a consistent supply of pork to markets is similarly dependent upon the price and availability of piglets.

Swine production methods emphasizing humane practices (uncertified), responsible land management, and/or heritage/non-commercial breeds are a significant portion of Vermont's swine sales, in direct-to-consumer, high-end wholesale, and institutional market channels. There is wide variability in swine management systems across Vermont, including managed pasture rotations, "land renovation" systems, wooded systems, deep-bedding barn systems, and free stall systems. Swine are single-stomached omnivores (like humans) and typically eat a grain-based diet, although some Vermont swine farms include feeding of other value-added production byproducts such as whey, apple pressings, vegetables, or distillery/brewery grains.

Vermont swine operations are typically divided into one of three models. "Farrow-to-finish" farms manage breeding through birth, growth, and marketing (127 producers). "Feeder piglet producers" manage sows and raise piglets through approximately 60 lbs (61 producers). "Feeder-finishers" (221 producers) raise feeder piglets to finished weight over six to eight months and either direct market to consumers and restaurants or ship to regional aggregators serving Vermont and Northeast cities.²



Bottlenecks & Gaps

- Well-started feeder piglets in sufficient quantity can be expensive or unavailable, requiring that piglets be imported from neighboring states and Canada in order to meet demand.
- There is limited Vermont swine-specific veterinary and technical assistance knowledge and capacity in the areas of nutrition, disease, breeding, and pasture/land management.
- Swine genetics developed and selected for hardiness, mothering, and forage-based or outdoor production systems have not emphasized growth speed or efficiency.
- There is a longstanding cultural expectation that individual farmers must be vertically integrated to manage every stage of the swine life cycle regardless of farm size, production system, or farmer skill set.
- Long shipping distances from grain-growing areas affects the affordability and availability of bulk swine feed.

Opportunities

- An increasing number of hog producers are identifying where they are most skilled and profitable in the production life cycle, and then partnering with other farms, aggregators, and markets to add their targeted portion into the whole production system.
- High-value specialty pork products (e.g., prosciutto) can be shipped to existing and new regional markets.
- Partnerships between regional swine experts and UVM Extension staff are in the beginning stages and could lead to a stronger network of swine knowledge and technical assistance.
- Act 148's emphasis on diverting organic food manufacturing byproducts out of the solid waste stream creates an opportunity to reduce feed costs through regional farmer/processor cooperation, within the framework of state regulations.
- Consumer demand for quality local, heritage, or pastured pork can grow through regional aggregation and marketing businesses (e.g., Black River Meats), individual farms offering direct delivery, and in-state farm stands.

Recommendations

- Create an education and outreach program to improve pork production and land management across production systems. In order to staff an outreach effort, UVM Extension would need an additional 0.5-1.0 FTE, with the balance of time used to build partnerships between producers, producer organizations, and additional swine resource personnel. Cost: \$50,000-\$100,000.
- Identify and expand opportunities for shared services among local, humane, heritage, and outdoor pork producers. Models outside of our region include shared services such as breeding technicians, veterinarians serving a cohort of partnering farms, co-owned equipment (e.g., loading chutes, lift trailer), and discounted rates on large purchases of feed or supplies.
- Bring together farmers, aggregators, and welfare certifiers to develop a shared set of definitions, principals, and protocols for differing land-based swine management systems (e.g., "pasture-raised"). This will enable better communication of the environmental, economic, and social benefits of Vermont pork to consumers.
- Develop a pork-focused agritourism project, such as a "bacon trail," publicizing a set of farms offering value-added pork products, or pork-product-based aspects to existing public events such as Open Farm Week. Bring together DigInVT partners, chefs, farmers, processors, and consumers to plan.
- Provide financial support for shared-learning cohorts of pork producers in business planning and management programs such as Ranching for Profit, and/or make grant opportunities available to graduates. Graduates could then participate in a profitability benchmarking program in order to better understand the program's benefits to their profitability and the positive impacts of learning and working in a producer cohort. Based on the costs of Ranching for Profit, estimated cost is \$100,000-\$150,000 to support farmer attendance, followed by business grants.

Farm to Plate is Vermont's food system plan being implemented statewide to increase economic development and jobs in the farm and food sector and improve access to healthy local food for all Vermonters.

The Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets (VAAFMM) facilitates, supports, and encourages the growth and viability of agriculture in Vermont while protecting the working landscape, human health, animal health, plant health, consumers, and the environment.

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